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AUTHOR	Martin, Suzanne M.; Williams, Jane M.; Hess, Robert K.
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ABSTRACT

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 (IDEA) reiterates the mandate that students with disabilities receive their education with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent possible. This paper examines issues in the implementation of IDEA in rural settings A survey of members of the American Council on Rural Special Education yielded 83 usable responses, mostly from college faculty and special education administrators. Virtually all respondents worked in rural or remote settings. Respondents identified distance to campus, retention of qualified personnel, recruitment of program personnel, distance to shopping and recreation, and salary schedule as major difficulties in their teacher preparation programs related to rural location. Half used practicum sites to ensure that students had specific special education knowledge and skills. Several distance learning strategies were used. Seventy-five percent of respondents reported shortages of special education teachers; half reported shortages of related services personnel. Top recruitment strategies were professional development opportunities, paid educational tuition, and salary incentives. Difficulties related specifically to IDEA implementation included lack of qualified personnel to conduct IDEA-mandated evaluations, problems of distance, and difficulties linking goals to the general education curriculum and designing and assessing behavioral intervention plans. Support for IDEA implementation came from the efforts of local personnel, strong family involvement, and interagency support. Recommendations are listed. (Contains 35 references.) (SV)

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Suzanne M. Martin, Ph.D
University of Central Florida
College of Education, Room 309
P.O. Box 161992
Orlando, Florida 32816-1992

Jane M. Williams, Ph.D., & Robert K. Hess, Ph.D
Arizona State University West
P.O. Box 37100
Phoenix, AZ 85069-7100

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PERSONNEL PREPARATION AND SERVICE DELIVERY ISSUES IN RURAL AREAS: THE STATE OF THE ART

Introduction

Delivering quality educational programming in rural settings[1] has always posed particular challenges to students, their families, and service providers. Economic and social difficulties, such as lack of financial resources to support educational services because of low wages and poverty, make service delivery issues particularly problematic in rural areas (Duncan, 1999; Stern, 1994; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994). In addition, geographic barriers such as mountains, lack of paved highways, and large distances between cities and towns create additional challenges (Dewees, 1999). Low numbers of students with disabilities in small schools, as well as difficulties recruiting and retaining special educators, intensify the difficulties of ensuring that students with disabilities receive quality special education and related services (Collins, 1999; Mullins, Morris, & Reinoehl, 1997; Westling & Whitten, 1996).

These difficulties, as well as lack of adequate facilities and available technology, also make implementing a comprehensive personnel preparation program in rural areas difficult (Dewees, 1999; Howley & Barker, 1997; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1996). Since 19% of schools and 9% of students in the United States are located in rural areas (U.S. Department of Education, 2000), it is critical that teacher preparation programs focus on the needs of rural practitioners (Collins, 1999; Education Commission of the States, 1999).

Service Delivery Issues

The IDEA of 1997 reiterates the mandate that students with disabilities receive their education with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997). Each year, the percentage of students with disabilities in general education settings increases. For example, as indicated by the 21st Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, during the 1996-97 school year, more than 95% of students with disabilities, ages 6 through 21, received a portion of their education in general education settings (U.S. Department of Education, 1999c). Students with disabilities in rural settings are more likely to receive their instruction in general education settings than their counterparts in urban or suburban settings (Sack, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 1996). There are many reasons for these differences. Small schools, fewer students with disabilities, and lack of resources, including qualified teachers are but a few. These issues limit the ability of many rural schools to offer the array of service delivery models that are available in suburban or urban settings (American Association of School Administrators, 1999; Stern, 1994).

Personnel Preparation Issues

The need for restructuring personnel preparation programs to meet the increasing need for qualified personnel in rural settings is not new, although it may have intensified since more students with disabilities are receiving their instruction within general education classrooms (U.S. Department of Education, 1999c). Data on

[1] According to the U.S. Department of Education, "an area designated as rural is an area with 2,500 inhabitants or fewer, and or a population density of less than 1,000 per square mile; it does not have a Census Urbanized Area Code." (U. S. Department of Education, 1999b, p. 120).

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teacher educators in rural areas suggest that the goal of the U.S. Department of Education, i.e., having a talented and dedicated teacher in every classroom, has not been attained (U.S. Department of Education, 1997). According to the American Council on Education (1999), teachers avoid high-poverty schools, and schools in high poverty areas, whether inner city or rural, have the highest number of unqualified teachers. Similarly, the U.S. General Accounting Office reported that rural schools have difficulty recruiting and retaining teachers due to lower salaries and geographic isolation (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994). Stern (1994) corroborated this finding in her report, The Condition of Education in Rural Schools. Westling and Whitten (1996) reported that only 57% of rural special educators planned to still be teaching in rural areas within five years. Though data abounds regarding the difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers in rural areas, Collins (1999) observed "few states have developed specific programs to address the problems of rural teacher recruitment and retention" (p.2).

Difficulties recruiting and retaining teachers certified to work with students with disabilities in rural settings are intensified by the demands of the job. Teachers in rural areas often feel social, cultural, and professional isolation from their colleagues as well as from research libraries and colleges and universities (Collins, 1999.) They often teach students with varying abilities, often within the same classroom, and they are responsible for many non-instructional activities, such as coaching and administrative duties (Morgan & Demchak, 1998). Because of these factors, as well as others, providing professional development opportunities for teachers and other service providers in rural districts is very difficult (Hillkirk, Chang, Oettinger, Saban, & Villet, 1998).

To date, however, there has been no systematic investigation of the status of the implementation of IDEA in rural settings or issues facing teacher education programs that prepare personnel to work with students with disabilities in these areas. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate the following research questions:

1. What difficulties are teacher education programs in rural areas experiencing in preparing teachers to work with students with disabilities?
2. What strategies are being used to address personnel preparation, recruitment, and retention of special education personnel in rural areas?
3. What difficulties and challenges are being experienced implementing the requirements of IDEA of 1997 in rural areas? What supports are available to assist in the implementation of IDEA?

Method

The authors began studying the issues related to the implementation of IDEA in rural settings and the preparation of teachers to deliver services to students with disabilities during the fall of 1997. Based on concerns, challenges, and possible solutions provided during a focus group at the ACRES conference in1998, we constructed a questionnaire to gather data in a more systematic way about personnel preparation, recruitment and retention and service delivery issues. Section one of the survey collected information concerning the respondent's position and school setting. Sections two through four included the recruitment and retention, service delivery and implementation questions.

In October 1999, we mailed the questionnaire to 166 members of ACRES. We followed the initial mailing with a telephone call to non-respondents, faxing a second copy of the questionnaire to those subjects. In February 2000, we conducted a second mail-out to nonrespondents. We followed the second mail-out with a final telephone call.

Results

The questionnaire was returned by 95 (57%) of the 166 members of ACRES. Twelve (7%) of the questionnaires were deleted because the respondents indicated they were unfamiliar with the subject matter or their position was not in a rural setting and hence they could not complete the questionnaire. Thus, 83 questionnaires were analyzed, representing a 50% response rate.

Sixty percent (50) of the respondents were university/college professors; 18% were special education supervisors/administrators; 6% were SEA/LEA administrators; 5% were special education teachers. The remainder held the following positions: 2%, general education supervisor/administrator; 1%, related services providers; and 6% listed "other." The "other" category was comprised of national clearinghouse personnel, staff development

personnel, and consultants. The majority of respondents (78.3%) worked in rural settings; 4.8% indicated they worked in remote settings; 8.4% indicated they worked in both rural and remote settings; 8.4% did not respond to the question.

The largest number of respondents, 37.3%, indicated that their teacher preparation programs are for special educators only 36.1% reported combined general education/special education programs; 30.1% reported that their teacher preparation programs were for general education majors only. Fifty-two percent of the respondents (43) provided enrollment data, program data, and certification data for personnel preparation programs. The data indicated that the number of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs ranged from 9 for a small program conferring a Bachelor's degree to the largest program of 11,500 full and part-time students conferring Bachelor's, Master's, and Ph.D. degrees.

Respondents identified distance to campus, retention of qualified personnel, recruitment of personnel into the program, proximity to shopping and cultural and sporting events, and salary schedule as the major difficulties in their teacher preparation programs as a result of being located in rural settings.

Half of the respondents (42) indicated that they are using practicum sites to ensure that teachers have the specific knowledge and skills needed to work with students with disabilities. Slightly fewer than half of the respondents (39) indicated that they were using a specific class to prepare their students; about a third of the respondents (29) indicated their programs were combined for prospective general and special educators. The distance learning strategies being utilized included internet, satellite transmission, compressed video, and Interactive Instructional Television (IITV).

Seventy-five percent of the respondents reported shortages of special education teachers; 51% of the respondents reported shortages of related services personnel. Thirty-one percent of the respondents reported shortages of psychologists and general education teachers; 25% of the respondents reported shortages of transition specialists. The top three recruitment strategies were professional development opportunities, paid educational tuition, and salary; the top three retention strategies were on-site professional development opportunities, paid educational opportunities, and salary incentives. Although salary was ranked third as the recruitment and retention strategy being implemented by the respondents, respondents identified salary as the strategy that was working the best for both recruitment and retention.

Thirty-seven percent of the respondents indicated that finding qualified personnel to conduct assessments was a major difficulty in implementing the evaluation/ reevaluation requirements of IDEA. Slightly more than one-third of the respondents reported that linking annual goals to the general education curriculum and determining how the child's disability affects his/her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum, was a difficulty. Twenty-three percent of the respondents indicated that employing behavioral strategies and/or positive behavioral supports to students was problematic. Greater difficulty appears to be in implementing the discipline provisions of IDEA, including designing behavioral intervention plans (34%), conducting functional behavioral assessments (30%), conducting a manifestation determination (30%), and determining an interim alternative educational setting (25%). Fifty-one percent of the respondents reported that a lack of qualified personnel was presenting a challenge to providing the services needed by students with disabilities in rural areas. Distance was ranked second by respondents as a challenge to implementing the requirements of IDEA.

When asked what supports were available to assist with the implementation of IDEA of 1997, respondents indicated that it was personnel, with support from the local and state education agencies, who were instrumental in assisting with meeting the requirements of IDEA of 1997. Respondents also indicated that strong family involvement and strong interagency support were helping meet the needs of students.

Discussion

Our findings that institutions of higher education are having difficulty recruiting prospective teachers to their programs because of distance from campus and proximity to shopping and cultural and sporting events are consistent with the findings of other researchers (Collins, 1999). The study also reinforced the findings of other studies that shortages of qualified personnel are most acute among special education teachers (Special education teacher shortage hits districts hard, 2000).

Our findings indicate that institutions of higher education in rural areas are utilizing specific coursework, coupled with practical experiences, to prepare professionals to meet the needs of students with disabilities in general education settings. This finding is consistent with reports from other institutions that they have recently revised their coursework (Corbett, Kilgore, & Sindelar, 1998; Lesar, Brenner, Habel, & Coleman, 1997). Our findings that approximately one- third of teacher preparation programs are offering combined special and general education programs suggest fewer institutions of higher education in rural settings are restructuring their programs in this manner than in other geographic areas (Lowenbraun & Nolen, 1998; Peterson & Beloin, 1998).

The fact that only 40% of the respondents indicated using distance learning strategies for providing professional development was surprising. Distance learning has become an increasingly common, as well as powerful, tool for providing professional development in rural settings (Bull, Winterowd, & Kimball, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, 1999a). One explanation for these results may be that many rural schools lack computers and telecommunication capabilities to provide internet access and participate in distance learning opportunities (Dewees,1999; Howley & Barker, 1997). A second explanation could be the lack of training in the use of technology needed for the distance delivery (Ferrell, Wright, Persichitte, & Lowell, 2000).

With regard to the finding that opportunities for professional development outranked salary as both a recruitment and retention tool, even though salary was ranked as the strategy that was working most successfully, the researchers were not surprised. As stated eloquently by Quality Counts (2000), "salaries alone won't keep teachers in the classroom" (p. 8). Indeed, it is the opportunity for professional development that provides the incentive to keep teachers refreshed and in the classroom.

It is interesting that none of the respondents indicated implementing either induction or mentoring programs as either a recruitment incentive or a retention strategy. These strategies are continuing to show results for recruiting and retaining teachers (Boyer & Gillespie, 2000; Quality Counts, 2000; Wald, 1998; Whitaker, 2000). However, as reported earlier, Collins (1999) observed that, "few states have developed specific programs to address the problems of rural teacher recruitment and retention" (p.2). The lack of these programs in rural areas is particularly disturbing when one reviews the results from the U.S. Department of Education's Baccalaureate and Beyond, a longitudinal study tracking teachers in their first years. Results cited in Quality Counts (2000) indicated that "teachers who did not participate in an induction program in their schools or districts were nearly twice as likely to leave the classroom (20 percent) as those who participated in such a program (11 percent)" (p. 17). Particularly in rural areas where teachers are at a premium, mentoring and induction programs appear to be most appropriate.

The finding that many personnel are continuing to find writing and implementing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that are consistent with the federal regulations difficult also is distressing. The results reflect that three of the new provisions are particularly problematic to practitioners – namely, linking results of evaluations to the general education curriculum, determining how the child's disability affects his or her involvement and progress in the general education curriculum, and conducting functional behavioral assessments and designing functional behavioral plans.

Our findings show that rural areas are relying on their personnel as well as other supports, including state and local education agency personnel, interagency resources, and family members. This fact reiterates the importance of local resources in the delivery of services to children and youth with disabilities. This finding reinforces the call for personnel in rural areas to pool their resources though clustering and collaboratives (Chow, Tyner, Estrin, & Koelsch, 1994; Nachtigal & Parker, 1990).

Recommendations

1. State departments of education and local education agencies must be involved with institutions of higher education in the preparation of qualified personnel to meet the needs of students with disabilities in rural settings.
2. While institutions of higher education cannot decrease the distance to sporting and cultural events and shopping, they could research ways for bringing these amenities to the campus.
3. Institutions of higher education in rural areas should consider restructuring their programs to include both general and special educators, particularly since many programs are achieving success with this arrangement.

4. Institutions of higher education and local education agencies must form collaborative partnerships to maximize the utilization of distance education techniques. These entities should also research sources such as Qualified Zone Academy Bonds (QZ-ABs) to add such capacity to their schools and districts. (See Dewees, 1999).
5. Institutions of higher education and state and local education agencies must continue to provide professional development activities for their faculty members since professional development is key to both recruitment and retention of practicing professionals.
6. State and local education agencies must devise aggressive recruitment and retention packages that include salary incentives; allocation of travel time and money to conferences and other professional development activities; provision of time to consult with colleagues; signing bonuses, housing allowances, and lucrative benefits packages.
7. Institutions of higher education, as well as state and local education agencies, must provide opportunities for practitioners and administrators to become proficient with implementing the new requirements of IDEA.
8. Federal and state agencies must implement policy and funding initiatives to support the preparation of personnel in rural areas and the operation of strong networking and collaborative programs in rural areas.

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